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ABSTRACT

Arguing that a teacher's theoretical orientation influences instruction, this paper identifies three theoretical orientations typical of reading teachers (phonics, skills, and whole language) and provides examples of typical instructional techniques of each. It next describes an observation instrument designed to help determine the theoretical orientation of a reading teacher. A copy of the instrument is appended. (FL)

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Classroom Analysis of Teachers' Theoretical Orientation to Reading

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Running Head: Classroom Analysis of Teachers' Theoretical Orientation to Reading

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Classroom Analysis of Teachers' Theoretical Orientation to Reading

The development of alternative approaches to reading instruction is one of the few commonly accepted tenets of reading. A reading teacher is likely to hear this philosophy espoused from the beginning reading course through an entire career: the use of alternative approaches to reading is stressed in teacher education methods courses; a reading teacher is advised to "try a different approach" when confronted with students who are seemingly not progressing as expected; the school's teacher evaluation instrument includes a Likert scale preceeding a statement such as "Teacher uses alternative approaches to instruction when appropriate"; the school compensatory education program is built upon the philosophy of offering the student "alternative educational experiences". Therefore, with this abundance of well-intentioned advice in mind, teachers immerse themselves in supplementary materials, games, discarded basal series and plan the "different approach" as though calculating an alternative plan during a strategic military operation. The questions of just how different this new approach really is never actually surfaces. Teachers may, in fact, include myriad new techniques without ever altering their underlying theoretical orientation (that is, their basic assumptions about reading) at all. Teachers approach reading instruction in such a consistent manner (Harste and Burke, 1977) that changing a theoretical orientation as simply as changing lesson

plans may be ineffective and, perhaps, impossible. If alternative approaches are actually desired within the reading curriculum, the teachers should be observed in the classroom to determine the theoretical orientation underlying their instruction. Once Ms. Adam's theoretical orientation to reading has been determined, for example, students can then be assured of receiving instruction consistent with her theoretical orientation. Students can also be assured of receiving an alternative type of instruction from Ms. Jones, who has been determined as operating from a second theoretical orientation to reading.

To demonstrate how teachers' theoretical orientation influences instruction and to describe a method of observing instruction to determine their theoretical orientation, the remainder of this paper will identify the three theoretical orientations, provide examples of typical instructional techniques of each, and present an observation instrument designed to help determine the theoretical orientation of a reading teacher.

Theoretical Orientations to Reading

A theoretical orientation is a particular system of beliefs that helps establish a person's decisions. In the area of reading, a teacher's theoretical orientation helps determine what instructional techniques and materials will be utilized in the classroom. For example, if a teacher's theoretical orientation consists of the belief that learning to read means pronouncing letters and sounding out words, that teacher will develop reading lessons that teach correspondences between letters and sounds.

There are three major theoretical orientations to reading instruction: phonics orientation, skills orientation (often referred to as sight words), and whole language orientation.

Phonics Orientation

The phonics orientation focuses on dissected portions of words: one second of reading is described as a letter by letter inflow of information (Gough, 1976). "Reading means getting meaning from certain combinations of letters. Teach the child what each letter stands for and he can read" (Flesch, 1955). Initial reading instruction is viewed primarily as decoding skills and eventually, comprehension of the message (McCraken and Walcutt, 1963).

Since the phonics orientation is primarily concerned with accurate word decoding, instruction consists of introducing letters and combinations of letters first, then short words that follow the specific sound/letter relationships being taught. Words not following this sound/letter relationship are excluded from the student's materials to be taught in a subsequent sound/letter relationship lesson or taught as sight words. However, the emphasis within the instructional lesson is not upon sight words, but upon the phoneme/grapheme relationships. Sentences and stories grow more complex as the reader's ability to grasp phoneme/grapheme relationships increases. Separate phonics lessons accompany each reading lesson and eventually, comprehension is addressed through development of strategies for recognizing whole-part, sequential, causal and comparative relationships (Matteoni, et al, 1980).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Skills Orientation

A skills (sight word) orientation emphasizes "rapidly developing a basic sight vocabulary" (Scott Foresman, 1962), and structural analysis skills. The other components of this model are comprehension skills and, to a lesser degree, phonemic analysis or decoding. Reading, therefore, is viewed as a "pie from which individual 'skill slices' can be extracted" (Harste and Burke, 1977).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Since the skills orientation stresses recognition of whole word units, the instruction, activities and materials involve high-frequency words. Generally new words to be learned by "sight" are introduced prior to each reading selection, repeated extensively in the story and successive stories, and finally tested at the conclusion of each unit of stories. In addition to the reading selection and introduction of vocabulary, each reading lesson includes a section on various reading skills such as structural analysis (prefixes, suffixes, contractions, compound words), comprehension skills (details, main idea, sequence of events, cause/effect relationships) and possibly study skills (map or chart reading).

Whole Language Orientation

A whole language orientation assumes that reading is a natural extension of language and therefore, readers may utilize background experiences as well as knowledge or language to develop their own strategies for dealing with print. Learning to read is viewed as bringing meaning to the print in order to obtain meaning from print. Reading always focuses upon comprehending, which is shown in Figure 3 as the core of the sphere.

Insert Figure 3 about here

The whole language orientation, with meaning as its primary focus, uses many different strategy lessons developed for individual needs encouraging integration of the language cue systems and the use of predicting, sampling, and confirming or correcting strategies (Weaver, 1980; Goodman, 1976). Activities also include "language experience" techniques such as student dictation and story writing; one or more numerous language immersion techniques such as reading aloud from (or taping) trade books while students follow along and eventually read in unison with the teacher; and reading components such as a sustained silent reading program. In all cases, strategy lessons do not fragment language into words or letters but rather keep language whole.

Though in each case the theoretical orientation is linked with examples of instructional techniques, activities or materials having stemmed from that orientation, they are not isomorphic. A theoretical

orientation is a belief system upon which people base decisions. On the other hand, instructional methods or techniques deal with more specific aspects: the process of providing activities intended to lead to certain desired learning outcomes (Posner and Rudnitsky, 1978).

Use of the Instrument

The Classroom Analysis of Teachers' Theoretical Orientation to Reading instrument was developed to provide a concise, systematic means by which an observer of the instruction within an elementary school reading classroom may determine the theoretical orientation of the teacher. The instrument has two schedules or major components. The first schedule is designed to observe the instruction and materials utilized during students' direct interaction with the teacher. The second schedule is used to observe the materials utilized during individual or small-group work not involving direct interaction with the teacher. Observation of individual or small-group work and observation of students' direct interaction with the teacher should not be conducted simultaneously within a class period since this would entail viewing too many classroom activities.

Of major importance to the development of this observational instrument is the choice of the instructional techniques and reading materials to be observed. Identification of all of the instructional techniques and reading materials used in an elementary classroom would be an impossible task, therefore the schedules involve only a representative sample of instructional techniques and materials from

the phonics, skills, and whole language methodologies. Variables observed during the students' direct interaction with the teacher are listed on schedule one; variables observed during individual or small group work are listed on schedule two.

Since instructional activities in early elementary grades are generally kept brief, the instrument utilizes one minute recording intervals. One minute intervals allow the observer to view instruction and materials, decide under which subgroup to record the observation and check the appropriate box. One minute intervals, also, are brief enough that the observer may record adequately the introduction of new instruction or new materials to the class or small group.

Non-instructional activities (i.e. management of classroom activities, discipline activities, and so forth) cannot be recorded on the regular grid of the instrument. Therefore, additional space is provided for recording these necessary classroom activities.

Following classroom observation of a reading teacher, totals may be added within each section of the instrument. These totals indicate the amount of time the teacher spent instructing or using materials from methodologies based upon the three theoretical orientations. For example, Ms. Smith may have spent a large portion of class time using teacher-made flash cards to introduce and practice sight words presented in a story. Following this drill, students were instructed to read the basal story with these sight words repeated extensively. By totalling class time on both the direct instruction schedule and the

individual/small group schedule, Ms. Smith appears to be using a skills methodology to teach reading. This methodology indicates her theoretical orientation to reading as being a skills orientation. Down the hall, however, Ms. Adams could be using those same basals within her classroom to operate from a different theoretical orientation. Perhaps, during observation of materials used during individual or small group work, the observer noted that Ms. Smith has recorded a basal story on tape and has instructed students to listen and read along with the tape or to another student when they feel comfortable doing so. Basals, which in the first instance indicated a skills orientation, are now being used as a recorded and repeated story, a strategy employed by teachers operating from a whole language orientation. The materials alone, then, cannot be the sole indication of the orientation of the teacher: the use of those materials must also be considered.

Though "trying a different approach" sounds like good educational advice, teachers need not rush to their supply rooms to retrieve materials with which to develop alternative approaches to use on Monday. Teachers have been shown to operate consistently from a single theoretical orientation. Therefore, since alternative approaches may be desirable within the reading curriculum, teachers should be observed in the classroom to determine the theoretical orientation underlying their instruction. Then, when a "different approach" is appropriate for certain students, an instructor operating from a different theoretical orientation may be provided for those students, guaranteeing methods and strategies from a truly "different approach".

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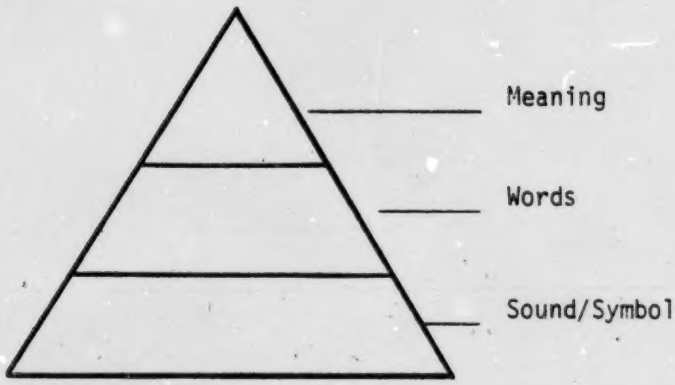
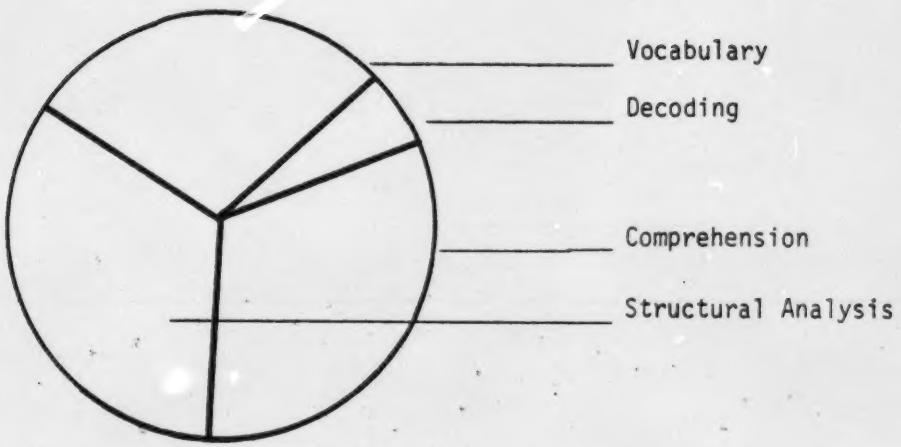
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Decoding Model of Reading

Figure 2. Skills Model of Reading

Figure 3. Whole Language or Language Based Model of Reading


Meaning
Words
Sound/Symbol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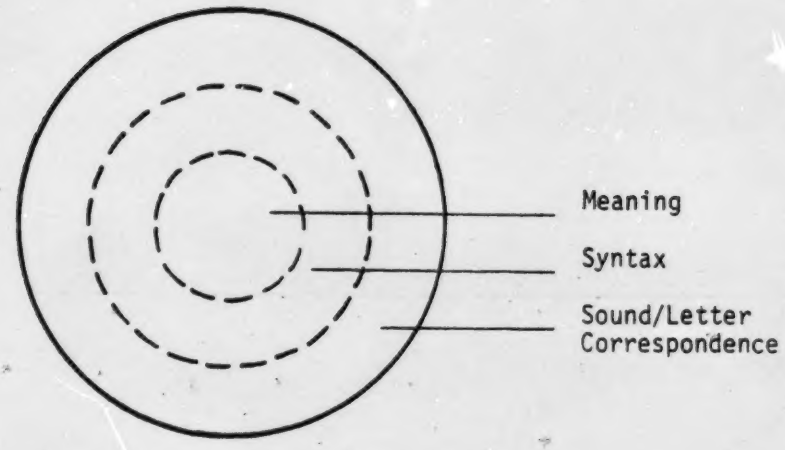
Comprehension
Structural Analysis


Meaning
Syntax
Sound/Letter
Correspondence

APPENDICES

Schedule 1: Direct Instruction and Instructional Materials. Classroom Analysis of Teacher's Theoretical Orientation to Reading.

Schedule 2: Individual/Small Group Instructional Materials. Classroom Analysis of Teacher's Theoretical Orientation to Reading.

SCHEDULE 1:

DIRECT INSTRUCTION AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

CLASSROOM ANALYSIS OF TEACHER'S THEORETICAL ORIENTATION TO READING

TEACHER _____ SCHOOL _____ GRADE _____

OBSERVER _____ DATE _____ TIME STARTED _____ TO _____

PHONICS

INSTRUCTION	MINUTES
1. Consonant sounds	
2. Vowel sounds	
3. Phonics rules	
4. Letter names	

MATERIALS:
1. Phonics rules
2. Consonants
3. Vowels
4. Letter names

SKILLS

INSTRUCTION
1. Sight words
2. Literal comprehension questions
3. Structural analysis skills
4. Study skills

MATERIALS

1. Sight words (isolated or story)
2. Story comprehension questions
3. Structural analysis skills
4. Study skills

WHOLE LANGUAGE

INSTRUCTION

1. Sustained silent reading
2. Student writing or dictation
3. Student follows/teacher reads

MATERIALS

1. Trade books
2. Language experience stories
3. Newspapers, magazines, etc.
4. Tapes, records of stories
5. Modified cloze format stories

NON-EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Directional, Management, etc.

SCHEDULE 2:

INDIVIDUAL/SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

CLASSROOM ANALYSIS OF TEACHER'S THEORETICAL ORIENTATION TO READING

TEACHER _____ SCHOOL _____ GRADE _____

OBSERVER _____ DATE _____ TIME STARTED _____ TO _____

PHONICS MATERIALS	MINUTES
1. Drill of word families	
2. Drill of phonics rules	
3. Vowel/consonant sounds	
4. Names of letters	
SKILLS MATERIALS	
1. Drill/story w/sight words	
2. Structural analysis skills	
3. Study skills	
4. Literal comp. questions	
WHOLE LANGUAGE MATERIALS	
1. Trade books	
2. Language experience stories	
3. Newspapers, magazines, etc.	
4. Recorded stories	